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Winemakers in the kitchen: These flavorful recipes showcase local vintages

By Stacey Yreken

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When the pressures of picking grapes and getting it in barrels hits hard at harvest time, how do some winemakers relax? They head for the kitchen.

"Cooking is relaxing. The kitchen is the focal point of our house," says Richard Alfaro of Alfaro Family Vineyards and Winery. "When I get home, I start cooking. That way I don't kick the kids."

Joking aside, winemakers are in the business of discerning subtle differences in flavor and breaking down elements that make up a vintage. It is only natural that they would excel in the kitchen as well as cellar.

To give a taste of how vintners cook, four winemakers, and their cooking host, have created a menu of potato and cherry tomato appetizers, beef bourguignon, savory bread pudding, Brussels sprouts and a cherry buckle, highlighting the tastes of local wines, perfect for a dinner party or potluck.

"It comes down to the creative aspect of cooking," says Mary Lindsay of Muns Vineyard and Silver Mountain Vineyards. "It's the enjoyment of discovering a new pairing for a wine."

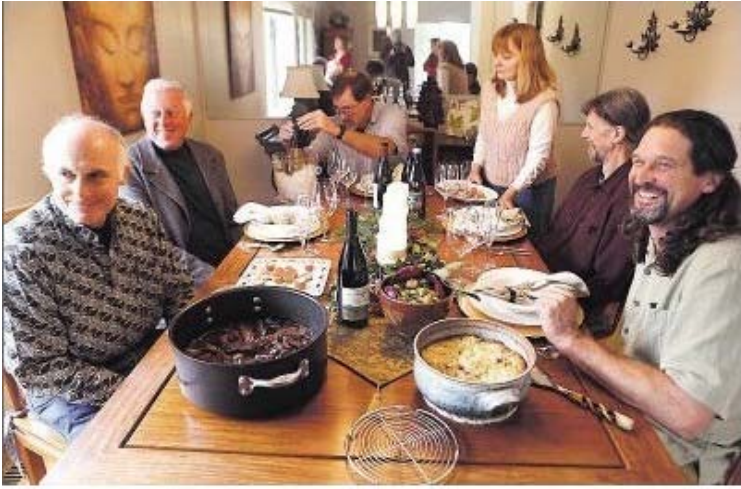
For Jeff Emery of Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard, it's the social aspect: "My close friends and I can spend five hours eating a meal, and it seems like no time at all."



Mary Lindsay serves appetizers matched to Equinox sparkling wine to Jeff Emery (Phil Carter/Sentinel)

As soon as a cool bite nips the air, these amateur chefs pull out the celery root, mushrooms, bacon, potatoes -- all the ingredients for "bakey, cheesy, gooey" dishes, says Emery.

Most of the flavors of fall and winter pair well with the wines that



From left, vintners Ed Muns, Jerold O'Brien, Barry Jackson, Mary Lindsay, Jeff Emry and Richard Alfaro chat around the table before dinner

excel in the Santa Cruz Mountains -- pinot noir. But winemaker Barry Jackson of Equinox has a vintage that pairs well with just about everything -- sparkling wine.

Jackson learned to cook as a Boy Scout and also learned that food is "more than something to get by on. When someone cares about the food, it tastes better."

Denise Ward hosts cooking classes in her home with Chowhound Cooks. She says matching food and wine "rounds out the whole experience."

Once prepared and served, good food ideas flowed like wine and everyone shared cooking hints, such as adding bay leaves to boost flavors on skewers for the grill.

Jackson's appetizers of stuffed cherry tomatoes and tobiko-topped potatoes matched to Equinox sparkling wine creates a party in your mouth --

salty, crunchy, creamy with a wasabi boost. Colorful with bright orange tobiko, Jackson suggested using purple potatoes to create a vibrant presentation.

Alfaro, former owner of Alfaro Bakery, creates a beef bourguignon, using pinot noir left from the tasting room and ingredients from the Corralitos area. The melt-in-your-mouth beef was delicate enough for the pinot, creating a tender match. The mushrooms and onions rounded the flavor and Corralitos bacon gave it a smoky touch. The simpleness of the dish underscores the wine.

Bacon was a favorite in the savory bread pudding and vegetable dish, too.

Muns Vineyard and Silver Mountain pinot noir paired well with Brussels sprouts, emphasizing the sweetness of the chestnut, with marjoram and coriander to complement the pinot noir. Lindsay showed how to tame the usually hard-to-match sprouts with bacon, nuts and apple.

Emery's savory bread pudding featured mushrooms he foraged in the Sierra. Emery is a big-time mushroom hunter and known for his culinary adventures. He broke from the pinot trend and paired his dish with durif,

Emery's savory bread pudding featured mushrooms he foraged in the Sierra. Emery is a big-time mushroom hunter and known for his culinary adventures. He broke from the pinot trend and paired his dish with durif, which is the "real" name for petite sirah, providing the earthy grounding for the fontina cheese and well-herbed sausage.

"It ties it all together," says Lindsay.

The sparkling wine came back out for dessert -- a cherry buckle that wasn't too sweet or heavy, but just right as a way to end the meal. The fruit and almonds provided contrast and the wine a delicate finish.

"It boils down to people, either growing stuff and or making wines, doing so with a depth of dedication that produces results. Any well-made wine goes with a well-made dish," says Jackson.

"Eating local for us is easy," says Emery, emphasizing the fertility of the Central Coast.

"We are so lucky with good ingredients. When we eat locally, we eat seasonally," says Lindsay.

"We don't use local wines/foods just because it's better, we do it because we have a connection to them," says Alfaro.

Herbed ricotta and chevre

Recipe from Barry Jackson

8 oz. ricotta cheese
4-6 oz. fresh goat cheese
2-3 Tbsps. shallot finely minced
1 Tbsp. olive oil
1 Tbsp. Tony's Italian gourmet seasoning
salt and pepper

Blend ricotta and goat cheese. Sweat down shallot in olive oil. Add to cheese. Mix in Tony's seasonings, salt and pepper to taste. Let stand refrigerated overnight. Will keep up to one week.

Best applied with a pastry bag. Pipe into cored-out large cherry tomatoes. Pipe onto cucumber, garnish with small tomato slice or slice of red pepper.

*Leftover cheese mixture makes excellent lasagna filling.

Variations

1. Use all ricotta or all goat cheese.
2. Add finely chopped, cooked Corralitos Market bacon.
3. Add red pepper puree/paste for color and taste.
4. Add hot sauce to pepper puree to spice it up.

Wine pairing

Dry sparkling wine or champagne and lighter reds. Bartolo Minerva, Cotes du Rhone, beaujolais, pinot noir.



Guests brought wines to match the food, including this bottle of Equinox from wine maker Barry Jackson (Phil Carter/Sentinel)

Equinox Potato Appetizer

Recipe from Barry Jackson

Sm. Yukon Gold potatoes
Sour cream
Wasabi paste
Tobiko flying fish roe

Cut baby potatoes in half. Steam potatoes until cook, slightly al dente is OK. Trim flat spot on round end of potato. Scoop out small portion of the large end. Mix wasabi paste into sour cream to taste. Apply small amount of wasabi sour cream to hollowed-out potato. Top with tobiko. Garnish with chive baton.

Variation

Spread wasabi sour cream on cucumber slice, top with tobiko.

Wine pairing

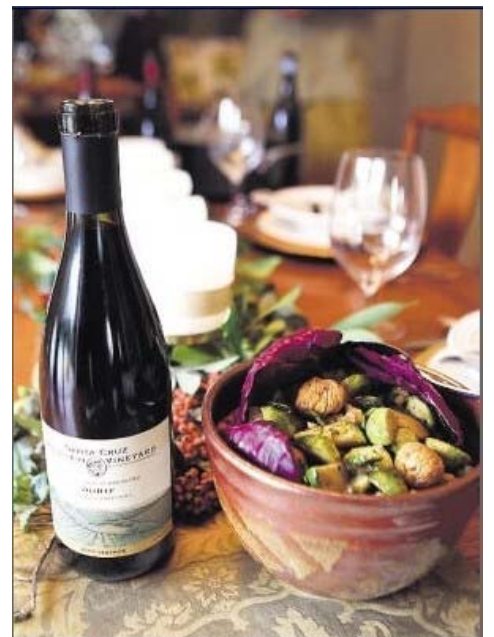
Equinox blanc de blanc or Equinox Harmony Cuvee.

Pan-Roasted Brussels Sprouts

Recipe from Mary Lindsay

Serves 4

1 lb. brussels sprouts
¼ cup shallot, finely chopped
3 strips bacon (omit for a vegetarian dish)
½ lb. chestnuts
½ sm. apple
olive oil
2 tbsp. broth vegetable or chicken
¼ tsp. coriander
½ tsp. marjoram
salt and pepper to taste



A Brussels sprout side dish made by Mary Lindsay pairs well with Pinot Noirs from Muns Vineyard. (Phil Carter/Sentinel photos)

Finely chop the shallot and saute in olive oil until golden and caramelized; set aside. Finely chop the apple. Score and roast the chestnuts; shell them and set aside the nuts. Clean and remove outer leaves as necessary from the brussels sprouts; slice in ½ or ¾ for the larger ones.

Heat 2 Tbsp. olive oil in a heavy skillet over medium low heat; add the brussels sprouts. Keep the heat down and stir frequently so they don't burn, and keep covered. Pan roast until they start to brown, about 5 minutes; then add 2 Tbsp. broth, the finely chopped apple, the shallot, the marjoram and coriander, salt and pepper to taste; cover again and continue to stir as needed. Cook until al dente, and pour into a dish.

In the same pan, fry up the strips of bacon; remove the bacon from the pan and stir the brussels sprouts into the bacon grease in the pan. Cut up the bacon and add it back in to the pan if you want. Cut the chestnuts into bite size pieces and add to the brussels sprouts. Heat through and cook until they are as done as you want them to be.

Note: 1 lb. of brussels sprouts roasts well in a large skillet. They need contact with the bottom of the pan to brown and caramelize. To cook more to serve more people you may need to cook them in batches.

Wine pairing

2004 or 2005 Muns Vineyard Pinot Noir, Santa Cruz Mountains

Savory Bread Pudding with Wild Mushrooms

Recipe by Jeff Emery

1 lg. or 2 med. leeks diced up white parts -- about one cup
1 med. sized celery root, diced into roughly qt.er inch chunks
6 eggs
3 cups or so of milk or half & half for more richness
1 cup of heavy cream
4-6 ozs. of Gruyere cheese
4-6 ozs. of Fontina cheese or other mild, rich cheese
2-3 links of interesting herby sausage
1 cup dried porcini mushrooms or other dried mushrooms of choice -- works best for infusing the mushroom flavor into the cream
Fresh herbs oregano, thyme, sage
Slightly stale bread cut into half-inch cubes any bread that isn't sweet usually one and a half loaves
1 Tbsp. butter, cut into sm. chunks

Put the dried mushrooms into the heavy cream and simmer them. You can also just let them soak in the heavy cream for a few hours if you have time. Soak or simmer until the mushrooms are nicely hydrated and soft again.

Place bread cubes into a shallow dish or bowl and pour milk over them in an amount to just about cover the bread. It will not all be submerged at first but will pack down into the milk more as it soaks and softens. Do the rest of the prep while the bread is soaking, mashing the bread into the milk from time to time for a good soaking. Soak 20 to 30 minutes depending on softness of the bread.

Cook the diced leeks and celery root in a skillet with butter, add some of the fresh herbs. Cook until celery root is just tender. Carmelized onions instead are optional.

Cut the sausage up into little pieces and cook it, either with the veggies or separately.

Squeeze the extra milk out of the soaking bread and mushrooms and set the bread and mushrooms aside.

Beat the eggs together with the mushroom-infused heavy cream and the milk squeezed from the bread and mushrooms. Add a teaspoon of salt and a teaspoon of pepper.

Mix together the bread cubes, cooked vegetables, remaining fresh herbs, mushrooms and sausage in a lightly buttered baking dish. Mix in a majority of the grated cheese, holding back an amount that will lightly cover the top of the dish. Then pour the egg mixture over the top and poke at the bread pieces to get all the liquid to go around the bread pieces. You can always add a little more milk if you feel the bread isn't submerged enough.

Spread the remaining cheese mixture over the top and distribute the little chunks of butter over the top before placing in the oven.

Bake at 325 degrees for around 45 minutes, or until the top is nice and brown and a knife comes out clean when inserted into the middle of the dish.

Wine Pairing

2006 Santa Cruz Mountains Durif from Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard. Durif is the "real" name for Petite Sirah. This Santa Cruz Mountains Durif is a limited production wine from a backyard vineyard off of Mt Eden Road below Mt Eden Vineyards. It retails for \$28 a bottle.

Corralitos Beef Bourguignon

Recipe by Richard Alfaro

Serves 8

4 lbs. boneless short ribs cut into 2 inch cubes
10 oz. Corralitos Market Apple Wood Smoked slab bacon
1 750 ml. bottle Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir from Corralitos
36 sm. button mushrooms
36 pearl onions
1 cup beef broth
1 Tbsp. Belle Farms Olive Oil
2 Tbsps. butter
1 Tbsp. Worcestershire sauce
3 Tbsps. brandy, cognac or grappa
1 bay leaf
1 Tbsp. fresh lemon juice
salt and pepper to taste
2 Tbsps. cornstarch
2 Tbsps. cold water

Blanch the pearl onions in boiling water for 3 minutes. Cool under cold water, peel and set aside.

Remove the skin and cut the smoked bacon in thick slices approx. 1/2 inch by 3 inches. Heat olive oil in an 8 qt. pot and cook bacon until golden. Remove and set aside. Add 1 tablespoon of butter to the pot and cook the onions over low heat until golden. Remove and set onions aside with bacon. Add meat to the pot and brown lightly on all sides. Remove and set aside.

Add the brandy cognac or grappa to the pot, scraping the bottom for about 1 minute. Add the wine. Ignite and wait until flames subside. Add browned meat and bay leaf to pot and simmer for 3 hours.

Trim, clean and dry the mushrooms. Add remaining butter and lemon juice into a saute pan and cook mushrooms until liquid is removed and mushrooms are golden.

After the meat has simmered for 3 hours add Corralitos Market Bacon, onions and mushroom and simmer for 1 more hour.

Remove onions, mushrooms, bacon and meat and set aside. Bring pot to a boil. Mix corn starch with cold water and slowly add to boiling sauce. Stir for approx. 2 minutes to thicken sauce. Return all ingredients to pot and heat for 5 minutes and serve.

Wine pairing

2007 Alfaro A' Estate Pinot Noir or the 2006 Lindsay Paige Vineyard' Estate Pinot Noir.

Cherry Buckle

By Denise Ward

1/2 cup whole almonds
1 1/2 cups all purpose flour
1 tsp baking powder
1/4 tsp fine sea salt
1 cup unsalted butter, room temp
1 cup plus 4 tsp sugar
2 lg. eggs
1 tsp vanilla extract
1/2 tsp almond extract
1 24-oz jar Morello cherries, drained well

Position rack in center of oven and preheat to 350 degrees. Spray 9-inch diameter cake pan with 2 inch high sides with nonstick spray. Line bottom of pan with parchment paper round.

Finely grind almonds in processor. Transfer to medium bowl; whisk in flour, baking powder, and salt. Using electric mixer, beat butter in large bowl until fluffy. Add 1 cup sugar; beat until well blended. Add eggs 1 at a time, beating well after each addition. Beat in vanilla and almond extract, then flour mixture until just incorporated.

Transfer to prepared pan; spread evenly and smooth top. Gently press cherries into batter.

Bake until tester comes out clean, about 50 minutes. Cool cake on rack for 20 minutes. Run knife around perimeter and invert onto rack. Invert again onto platter and cool.

Wine pairing

Equinox blanc de blanc or Equinox Harmony Cuvee.



Vintner Richard Alfaro, right, serves freshly made appetizers topped with flying fish roe during dinner with other local winemakers (Phil Carter/Sentinel)

GET A TASTE

Chowhound Cooks Classes

Denise Ward of Chowhound Cooks leads all types of cooking classes in her Aptos home. Classes with winemakers include Martin Ranch on March 5 and Silver Mountain on March 19. Each class features five courses with wine paired to each course. Class members prepare the entire meal under direction and the winemaker joins the table to present and pour wines. Gift certificates available. Call 600-5794 or visit chowhoundcooks.com.

Wine

Equinox, Santa Cruz Mountain Vineyard, Silver Mountain Vineyards all have tasting rooms on Ingalls Street in the Swift Street Courtyard on the Westside of Santa Cruz. Alfaro Family Vineyards and Winery is at 420 Harnes Road, Corralitos. All are open weekends for tasting.